

# Delaware Takes the Lead in Tackling College Readiness and Retention

**Data released from project with Harvard will help state continue work on improving college graduation rates**

Delaware took a major step today toward improving low college graduation rates that are holding back the capabilities of our workforce nationwide. Governor Jack Markell and Secretary of Education Mark Murphy joined researchers from the Strategic Data Project (SDP), a program of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, to release findings on Delaware students' college readiness, enrollment and retention, presenting one of the first thorough analyses done for any state by SDP. The project continues the data-driven approach to student achievement that helped Delaware win the Race to the Top federal funding competition.

With the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reporting barely half of college freshmen in the country earning a postsecondary degree within six years and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems finding that only 20 percent of high school freshmen reach that important milestone, Delaware partnered with SDP to document and better understand outcomes among Delaware's young people. The state will use this analysis to inform policy initiatives to improve high school graduation, increase enrollment in college and other career pathway programs, and improve college retention rates in partnership with school districts and charter schools.

“To give Delawareans the best opportunity to succeed in the global economy and to build a workforce that attracts new and expanding companies, we must give our young people the best chance to graduate high school and successfully pursue further education and training,” Markell



said, “Our strategies to improve educational opportunities can only succeed if we fully understand the obstacles that prevent students from reaching their potential. The data released today gives Delaware an advantage in determining the most effective way forward.”

Delaware College-Going Diagnostic: An Analysis of The First State Students’ College Readiness is the result of work between SDP and the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) using six years of data from the DDOE and the National Student Clearinghouse. The diagnostic examines students’ progression through high school, how well they stay on track for graduation, and whether they enroll and persist in postsecondary education.

## **Delaware Progress**

Having acknowledged the national scope of the issues detailed in the report’s findings, Delaware has taken steps to boost college and career readiness.

The diagnostic found some recent progress, including a steady increase over the past four years in the number of Delaware high school freshman who remain on track for graduation.

- In 2008, 19 percent of ninth-graders finished the year behind, as compared to 12 percent in 2012. During that time and in conjunction with their Race to the Top plans, several Delaware school districts have

implemented “Ninth Grade Academies,” summer preview programs and other initiatives that provide more individualized attention to freshmen and help with the transition from middle school to high school.

- Underscoring the importance of freshman performance, the data show that when students fall behind in credits by the end of the ninth grade, only 30 percent graduate on time and half drop out.
- The data support the importance of strengthening transitions from middle to high school and offering more support for freshmen: Most students who fall off track do so during their freshman year (70 percent) while a much smaller percentage fall off track in Year 2 (17 percent), Year 3 (8 percent) or Year 4 (5 percent).

Through legislation, executive action and its Race to the Top plan, the Markell Administration has implemented policies centered on four key components. These efforts deal with the issues raised by the report by helping current and future high school students become college and career ready.

- Raise expectations for all students with the Common Core State Standards and world-class curriculum, including the Governor’s World Language Expansion.
- Expand high-quality early childhood education opportunities for our highest-need students with the Early Childhood Strategic Plan, recognizing that kids who enter kindergarten behind often cannot catch up by high school.
- Elevate the education profession with more meaningful educator preparation and professional development.
- Use data to drive decision-making and continuous improvement with top-rated data systems and statewide professional learning communities in which all teachers regularly meet in small peer groups to review student progress and share best practices.

## **Key Findings**

Overall, the statistics unveiled today will allow the state to better target particular efforts to the students who would most benefit. Among other [findings released to a gathering of educators, higher education leadership, community leaders and other partners](#) at P.S. duPont Middle School in Wilmington:

- The analysis shows great variation in the percentage of students who progress from ninth grade into college among high schools.
  - The highest high school rate shows 81 percent of ninth-graders persist to their second year of college. The lowest high school rate is 4 percent.
  - Some schools' success seems especially promising and worthy of further study to see what is working and how that success can be replicated across the state.
    - For example, Brandywine High School has a seamless college enrollment rate far above the state average for those students entering its school who were in the bottom quartile of math performance statewide (41 percent in Brandywine compared to 25 percent statewide) and top quartile (80 percent in Brandywine compared to 71 percent statewide).
- The analysis suggests it is critical to catch students up who are behind in middle school: Students who performed better in eighth grade are much more likely to graduate high school on time and progress to college.
  - Of those entering ninth grade in the top quartile of their class, 92 percent will graduate on time and 66 percent will make a seamless transition to college.
  - Of those entering ninth grade in the bottom quartile of their class, 61 percent will graduate on time and 15 percent will make a seamless transition to college.
- Highly qualified low-income students are more likely to

‘under-match’ in their college choices.

- 27 percent of highly qualified low-income students are not going to college and 55 percent enroll at selective four-year colleges.
- While statewide 30 percent of Delaware’s ninth-graders remain in college by their second year, the percentage is lower among students who come from low-income families and students of some racial subgroups.
  - 17 percent of low-income ninth-graders persist to their second year of college.
  - While 35 percent of white ninth-graders remain in college by their second year, 14 percent of Hispanic and 22 percent of black ninth-graders do.
  - Asian ninth-graders had the highest rate at 54 percent.

## **State Agenda Moving Forward**

Other initiatives are underway at the local and state levels to address these statistics, including:

- Assisting with the College Application Process
  - Through ‘Summer Nudge’—a partnership between the Delaware Department of Education, the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University and the College Board—the state is actively reaching out via a variety of media to students identified as ready for college who have not enrolled, with the intent of providing support and resources to facilitate their transition to college.
  - This year, the state will expand last year’s pilot of College Application Week to a College Application Month, offering this program to more schools across the state.
  - The state is working with U.S. Department of Education and state Office of Volunteerism to support and expand FAFSA nights, chances for

families to get information and support filling out the federal form for student financial aid.

- Preparing Middle School Students
  - The state recently launched a program through which schools can receive funding to implement an approved middle school college preparation program that particularly targets high-need and low-achieving students.
- Transitioning from High School
  - Through the College Access Challenge Grant, the state has been working to increase the number of students in dual enrollment courses, giving them a college-going experience and college credits while in high school.
  - Race to the Top funding has also supported graduation coaches, who are assigned to students to ensure they remain on track and pursue the path that best suits them.
  - Through the School Improvement Grant process, districts have split high schools into multiple schools that focus on specific career interests, such as business, arts and STEM.
- Tracking Student Performance Effectively
  - The state has invested in new data systems that allow administrators and teachers to more quickly recognize specific struggles of individual students.
  - Leaders in K–12 education and higher education also convene regularly to better understand student data and share techniques that produce the best results.